Have you ever stood silently at a party while those around you reminisce about their “good old college days?” Do you worry about how you will support yourself once you retire from dancing? Have you tried taking one or two sporadic college courses only to be forced to quit because a tour got in the way, or your workload at the studio was too heavy? Does your family worry about your choice to pursue a professional dance career after high school, rather than attend college?

These are common concerns among dancers. Fortunately, there is a unique college degree program working to address them. Liberal Education for Arts Professionals, known as LEAP, enables current or retired dance professionals to earn a Bachelor of Arts degree from Saint Mary’s College in Moraga, California.

Founded in 1999 by Claire Sheridan, a dancer and teacher at the college, LEAP has recently expanded to offer courses not only in the San Francisco Bay Area, but also in Los Angeles. And, the staff is currently exploring the feasibility of bringing LEAP to the New York dance community.

The program is aptly named in that it gives students a jump start on their education by granting college credit for professional dance experience. Through an accelerated course of study, students can receive their B.A. in just three to four years of part-time work. LEAP Program Director Mark Baird explains, “In founding the program, we wanted to honor and value a dancer’s experience.

Dancers work so hard to get where they are. That experience should be worth something.” At LEAP, demonstration of one’s dance background through a process called “challenge by examination” can count for up to 30 college credits.

LEAP students may also petition for college credit for learning acquired in subject areas other than dance. In addition, the program also accommodates the transfer of credits from other colleges.

“Allowing students to take at least 30 credits from outside, local, or community colleges makes the program more affordable,” Baird explains. Taking courses at outside colleges also allows LEAP students greater flexibility in constructing an individualized course of study. Baird cites the example of Caroline Loyola, a LEAP graduate who is currently enrolled in a Graduate Program in International Relations at San Francisco State University. “In order to be eligible for that graduate program, Caroline needed to take
courses such as Micro and Macro Economics,” Baird describes. “She could go to community college and take those specific courses in order to reach her future educational goals.”

Regardless of how many credits are tallied for previous work, all LEAP students are required to take ten core courses. The offerings range from “Writing for the Major” to “Critical Perspectives I” to “World Traditions.” The cost is relatively low - $16,860. LEAP classes meet once a week on Sunday or Monday evenings for 8-10 weeks at a time. In San Francisco, classes are held in a conference room downtown, near the Opera House, in order to save dancers the 45 minute commute to Saint Mary’s campus.

Baird describes, “The schedule was created to fit into a dancer’s or working adult’s lifestyle. It is often so hard for dancers to go back to college because classes are usually offered in the evenings. And, dancers need to rehearse and perform in the evenings. Having LEAP classes meet on Sunday evening means that the dancers can finish a matinee performance at 4:30, grab a bite to eat, and be in time for class at 6:00.”

Upon enrolling in the LEAP program, students are placed in a cluster of 18 classmates who remain together throughout the core curriculum. LEAP students range in age from their early twenties to their mid sixties and have diverse dance backgrounds in ballet, modern, jazz, musical theatre, television, film, and video.

Shely Pack-Manning, Director of The Shely Pack Dancers and a current LEAP student, describes, “I’ve grown very close with my cluster. I didn’t know any of them before, but a lot of us have formed very deep personal friendships.” She admires her fellow classmates’ work ethic and notes, “Dancers
are so demanding of themselves and they bring that mindset into the classroom. We all expect to get an “A” because that is how we work in the studio or on stage. Everyone always has their homework done and then some. We go the extra mile because that is how dancers are.” Pack-Manning wants to complete her college degree in order to be able to teach dance at the university level and in Europe.

While many LEAP students remain in the dance field upon graduation, others choose to do something completely different. LEAP graduates are currently pursuing careers in Elementary Education, Law, Physical Therapy, Journalism, and Acting/Directing.

For Maurya Kerr, a principal dancer with Alonzo King’s Lines Ballet and a current LEAP student, receiving her college degree is a stepping stone on the way toward receiving her Masters in Writing. “I want to do something totally different than dance. I might teach at the college level,” Kerr explains. “I want to be in academia and immerse myself in the life of the mind because I’ve been living the life of the body for so long.”

Whether one’s future plans remain rooted in the dance world or far outside of it, Kerr believes strongly in the benefits of education and states, “Everyone needs to complete their education. Dancers shouldn’t be excluded from that just because we missed an opportunity early on given the strenuousness of our career at such a young age.” Kerr cites the dangers of a dance career as, “No job security, little future planning, and no retirement benefits.” She continues, “Dance is very short lived. There needs to be something in place beyond one’s performance career which is usually over at the age of 35.” In addition to the practical side of education, learning offers something greater. Kerr describes, “There is a misconception that dancers don’t think. It is not that we have to go to school in order to prove that otherwise. But, it is important to be well rounded and to develop all facets of oneself. Developing the intellect is a very important part of being alive in this world.”

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